

The Five Points of Calvinism: Contrasting Extreme versus Moderate Calvinistic Positions

Extreme Calvinism and Moderate Calvinism differ greatly with respect to the major doctrines that come under the umbrella of Calvinism. The following is a comparison of the five points of Calvinism as taught by Extreme and Moderate Calvinists. It should be noted that the term “Extreme Calvinism,” as used in this paper, does not mean “hyper Calvinism.” Many who hold to the doctrines of Extreme Calvinism would reject the hyper Calvinistic doctrine of double predestination.

Total Depravity	
<i>Extreme Calvinism</i>	<i>Moderate Calvinism</i>
Extreme Calvinism defines total depravity as total inability. They mean the elimination of all human ability to understand or respond to God. The effects of sin destroyed man's ability to accept God's gift of salvation. The human will is in bondage to sin and cannot respond to the call of God unto salvation. Fallen man is unable to choose the gift of salvation. The sinner is not a free agent because he is a slave to sin. Extreme Calvinism concludes that the non-elect are unable to repent and believe. Therefore God has to first regenerate man and give him faith before he can believe and be born again.	Moderate Calvinism maintains that man's depravity is “total.” Since the fall of Adam all men are born in sin with Adam's sin nature. There is no part of man's nature that was not affected by sin. Man is totally depraved, and unable to change his inherent sin nature. But total depravity does not mean total inability. Man's will is free to choose the gift of salvation. The basis or ground of human responsibility is human ability. Even though man does have a free will, he has no capacity for saving himself. God graciously draws people to Himself, but free will is the means by which salvation is received.

Unconditional Election	
<i>Extreme Calvinism</i>	<i>Moderate Calvinism</i>
According to Extreme Calvinism Total Inability is closely related to Unconditional Election. Extreme Calvinism equates predestination and election. God predestines those who will be saved and those who will be lost. The Westminster Confession put it in these words: “By the decree of God ... some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.” This predestination is based solely upon the will of God and has nothing to do with the response of man. However, in 1 Peter 1:2 we see that the saved are “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” Extreme Calvinism redefines the word “foreknowledge” to mean “foreordination” in order fit their theology.	Moderate Calvinists agree that salvation is an unconditional gift. The question is not whether there are any conditions for God giving salvation; but whether there are any conditions for man receiving salvation. Election is unconditional from the vantage point of the Giver, but there is one condition for the receiver. Faith is the condition for receiving salvation. Moderate Calvinism does not have to redefine the word “foreknowledge” in 1 Peter 1:2. Election is “according to” or “in harmony with” God's foreknowledge. God's election is neither based on His foreknowledge of man's free choice nor is His election exercised independent of it. There is no chronological or logical priority of God's election and God's foreknowledge.

Limited Atonement	
<i>Extreme Calvinism</i>	<i>Moderate Calvinism</i>
Extreme Calvinism teaches that Christ died only for the elect and not the whole world. They reason that if Christ died for the whole world then everyone would be saved which is contrary to scripture—a heresy known as universalism. Extreme Calvinistic logic states: “If God the Father elected some to everlasting life, then it must follow that Christ died for them only and not for all men without distinction.” Extreme Calvinism defines “world” as meaning “the elect.” For God so loved the world (of the elect) that He gave His only begotten Son ...”	Moderate Calvinism agrees with John Calvin who wrote, “Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and in the goodness of God is offered unto all men without distinction, His blood being shed not for part of the world only, but for the whole human race...” God sent the Son into the world that the world through Him might be saved (Jn. 3:17). That's why Jesus is referred to as the Savior of the world (Jn. 4:42; 1 Jn. 4:14). In dying for the whole world, Christ tasted death for every man (Heb. 2:9). Jesus is truly the Savior of all men (1 Tim. 4:10). Atonement is unlimited in scope in that the offer of salvation is for all men. Atonement is limited in effect in that only believers are truly saved.

Irresistible Grace	
<i>Extreme Calvinism</i>	<i>Moderate Calvinism</i>
<p>According to Extreme Calvinism, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. This internal call cannot be rejected. Extreme Calvinists reason: “All sinners who hear the gospel are commanded to repent and believe. But this they cannot do, because they are dead in trespasses and sins. Then God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, creates within his elect the power to do what he commands. The divine and sovereign act of regeneration effected by the Holy Spirit precedes the human activity of repentance and faith.”</p> <p>Extreme Calvinism’s consistency and logic requires the doctrine of irresistible grace. Because of [1] total inability, [2] God the Father elected certain ones to salvation, [3] God the Son died for only the elect, therefore [4] God the Spirit regenerates the elect so they can believe the gospel.</p>	<p>Moderate Calvinism maintains that saving faith is the God-ordained means for regeneration, and not the result of regeneration. Regeneration or the new birth takes place at the moment a person trusts in Christ and not before they trust in Christ. The scriptural order is first faith and then life. Putting regeneration before faith is putting the cart before the horse. God’s Word consistently conditions justification and/or eternal life on faith, not vice versa. According to Moderate Calvinism it is possible to resist prompting of the Holy Spirit. Moderate Calvinism insists that no one is ever saved against his will as the Extreme Calvinist teaches.</p>

Perseverance of the Saints	
<i>Extreme Calvinism</i>	<i>Moderate Calvinism</i>
<p>Some have thought that traditional Calvinistic teaching on Perseverance of the saints is the same as eternal security. However, there are some significant differences. Extreme Calvinism teaches that the elect will be faithful to the end and will not die in a sinful state. As a result, you can never be sure if you are one of the elect until you have actually persevered until the end and die in faith. Many (but not all) Extreme Calvinists repudiate the teaching of “once saved always saved” stating that this doctrine is from the pit of hell.</p>	<p>Moderate Calvinism teaches preservation of the saints as opposed to perseverance of the saints. The Biblical doctrine of Eternal Security teaches that the believer will be preserved by the grace of God. No saint will ever be lost (even if they die in a sinful state). The believer is eternally secure. Moderate Calvinists believe in assurance of salvation while on earth whereas Extreme Calvinists teach that no one can know 100% for sure that they are saved.</p>

Recommended Reading:

- “Chosen But Free” by Norman Geisler
- “What Love is This” by Dave Hunt
- “The Other Side of Calvinism” by Laurence M. Vance
- “Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism” by C. Gordon Olson